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SUBJECT: CODEL LOWEY AND SAUDI VICE MINISTER OF EDUCATION  
DISCUSS KACND'S ROLE IN KING'S REFORM EFFORTS

REF: A. 10 RIYADH 172  
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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (U) During a February 14 visit to the National Dialogue Center (KACND) CODEL Lowey was briefed on its primary goal of combating extremism by promoting dialogue and exchanges of differing points of view among Saudis. On the role of women the Center's Director explained the SAG privatization strategy to increase jobs for women and asserted that "social boundaries" prevented women from driving and that it was not a "high priority" for Saudi women. The Director also outlined comprehensive education reforms (known as the "Tatweer" development program), including increasing math and science content of primary and secondary curriculums, aimed at improving critical thinking skills. End summary.

CODEL LOWEY VISIT TO NATIONAL DIALOGUE CENTER  
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[1](#)2. (U) On February 14 CODEL Lowey met with Saudi Arabia's Vice Minister of Education and Secretary General of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND), Dr. Faisal Bin Moammar, to discuss KACND's role in King Abdullah's reform efforts. The convivial two-hour meeting, which was attended by Saudi officials active in education development and planning, took place at KACND and covered a wide variety of topics, foremost among them the purpose of and vision for KACND. The meeting between CODEL Lowey and Dr. Bin Moammar began with expressions of appreciation concerning the CODEL's visit to KACND, introductions of the participants and an explanation of their activities. On the U.S. side, a delegation headed by Congresswoman Nita Lowey included members of the House Appropriations Committee, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the House Armed Services Committee, the House Ways and Means Committee and the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee attended the meeting. Saudi participants included delegates active in education development and planning, among them Dr. Nair Al-Roomi, Deputy Minister of Education for Development and Planning; Dr. Ali Al-Hakami, General Manager of the Education Development Project; Dr. Hanan Al-Ahmadi, Director of the Institute of Public Administration; Ms. Jenan Al-Ahmad, Director of the Female Department in the Education Development Project; and Dr. Bandar Al-Sowailem, Secretary General of the National Committee for UNICEF.

13. (U) At the outset of the meeting Chairwoman Lowey stressed that the U.S. had "great hope for Saudi Arabia's continued leadership" in the region and the world but that there were challenges the SAG had to face, including Iran and the Israel-Palestinian issue.

#### KACND'S MISSION: PROMOTE DIALOGUE TO FIGHT EXTREMISM

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14. (U) KACND's Secretary General, Faisal Bin Moammar, explained that KACND was an independent organization that was part of the Kingdom's civil society. Established six years ago and working with mosques, schools and families to promote the skill of dialogue, a skill that was lacking in Saudi society according to Bin Moammar, it was hoped that KACND would reach eight million people within the next three years.

Bin Moammar said KACND was the King's best method for fighting extremism in that it was building bridges between decision makers and society. Saudi Arabia was "at the heart of Islam" with the two holiest places of Islam located in the country and with 1 billion 500 million Muslims looking to Saudi Arabia, and therefore change needed to come from within Saudi Arabia, he said. He further noted that Saudi Arabia was "the only country in which the government initiated change and society resisted it."

15. (U) The delegation watched a promotional video according to which KACND's objective was to "unite Saudis under one roof" by facilitating the expression of views and enabling the hearing of other points of view through a series of national dialogues to "spread the culture of dialogue, tolerance and mediation." Eight national dialogues have taken place to date, organized according to themes, the video

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mentioned. While the first national dialogue meeting was limited to male participation, subsequently, men and women have participated, and the national dialogues have been transmitted via television ever since the fourth dialogue. Teachers, professors, youths, religious leaders, and the private and other diverse sectors participated in the dialogues and on-line feedback concerning the dialogues is encouraged, according to the video. Noting that the family was the birthplace of communication skills, the video stated that KACND targeted changing the culture of dialogue at that level and worked through seminars that stressed Islamic beliefs, including the peaceful coexistence of cultures and societies. Further, KACND targeted youth as future leaders. King Abdullah is directly involved in the seminars, and journalists and various segments of society participate. KACND has 1,200 trainers, according to the video.

16. (U) Congressman Chandler of Kentucky asked how KACND's mission was viewed in the broader Islamic world. Bin Moammar responded that KACND was a "unique experience" not available elsewhere in the Islamic world. He said that although there had been dialogues elsewhere, "nobody else had a program of trying to reach the mass of the people." He explained that KACND was working with the Islamic League and other countries, and that most recently UNESCO Beirut had requested a train-the-trainer program, that would result in training efforts in Syria and Jordan further down the line. Bin Moammar said Johns-Hopkins University had endorsed the training program.

#### TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION IN COMMUNICATION

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17. (U) Congressman Whitfield of Kentucky asked how the Qur'an determined a young woman's ability to work or to get a divorce and who had the authority to make these decisions about her life. Dr. Bin Moammar said that the Ulema or religious leaders handled problems through existing fatwas.

He stressed the importance of traditions in Saudi Arabia based on which the majority of families conducted their social lives. Bin Moammar said the SAG was using education and the media to reform the traditions and had succeeded in "fighting many negative aspects."

¶18. (U) Dr. Hind Al-Khalifa of King Saud University said that Islam was a lifestyle covering all issues and that the Qur'an set forth all aspects of justice and guided communications with others. She observed that a problem existed with the interpretation (interception) of the text and the educational level of some of the interpreters of the text. She explained that KACND's training was based on Islamic aspects as well. She had participated in a program that involved a dialogue with Satan and the Prophet in which God talked to both. She said the program taught her that, as neither the Prophet nor Satan but someone in the middle, she should feel free to talk. Dr. Al-Khalifa said that the training also raised her awareness of the importance of listening and of the need to give people space to talk. She said the realization of the fact that society was in need of this awareness was one of the successes of KACND. Lastly, she attributed the fact that children of well-known families were involved in terrorism to the lack of dialogue in society.

¶19. (U) Hammam Al-Juraied, head the Youth Committee, said KACND empowered youth by giving them a voice. He recalled that the Sixth National Dialogue related to youth issues and resulted in recommendations from King Abdullah, as a result of which a dialogue cafe and an Ambassador program had been established. KACND's youth groups help organize events and seminars and guided by trainers, they had recently started holding open discussions in malls to engage youth. She said that training was also being conducted in small towns and villages. Yasser Al Fraih, a member of KACND's youth committee, said the young Ambassadors program promoted dialogue and cleared up misconceptions without losing the local identity in the process.

#### KACND'S MEASURE OF SUCCESS

¶10. (U) Representative Hastings of Florida noted that he had been to many meetings where nothing happened afterwards, so-called "feel good sessions," and wanted to know how KACND

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was measuring whether it had achieved anything. Bin Moammar said KACND identified issues in an annual report to the King, who pursued the issues through follow-up with various offices and departments. According to Bin Moammar the annual study confirmed how much had been achieved and KACND changed its tools based on the study. He stressed that a "silent majority" was the best weapon for fighting extremism and said that extremist ideas were shrinking in society. Bin Moammar said that training people in the "skill of dialogue" was KACND's most important objective because it prepared people to become part of the decision-making process.

¶11. (U) Dr. Amal Al-Moallimi, a trainer for KACND, added that KACND's objective was to make people more tolerant. She thought it was impossible to change the reality on the ground except through the power of the word. She compared KACND's work to President Obama's "yes, we can" campaign, which helped him become the first African-American president in history, according to her.

¶12. (U) Dr. Al-Ahmadi said that the dialogue had changed the culture and had become a successful program to fight and prevent terrorism. She noted that the number of terrorist incidents had been significantly reduced. Moreover, she said, children had started to tell their parents that they needed to have a discussion prior to making a decision. Previous generations had been raised with a different attitude, according to Al-Ahmadi, but the culture of dialogue

had created an actual change in society.

#### MORE WOMEN GRADUATES IN GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS

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¶13. (U) Pointing out the greater role women were beginning to assume in Saudi society, Bin Moammar joked about the "female domination" of KACND. Chairwoman Lowey responded that "good, strong women could make an amazing change in the world," and mentioned that she had heard that 60 percent of the university students in Saudi Arabia were women. She asked where the graduates would end up working and what the percentages were of female graduates going into business, academia, and other sectors. She also wanted to know whether there was a glass ceiling for women. Dr. Hanan Al-Ahmadi, Director of the Institute for Public Administration, addressed the question stating that she did not have statistics but that women graduates mainly worked in education. She said that 65 percent of the graduate students were women and ended up in academia and the health professions. As a result of the Saudi Arabian Government's privatization strategy, more women were moving into the government and private, entrepreneurial sectors, Dr. Al-Ahmadi further explained. Private foundations supported this trend and 4,000 women received management training annually, according to her. However, according to Al-Ahmadi, a barrier to certain professions that are not "convenient for women, such as engineering," existed.

#### PLEASE DON'T MEASURE ME BY WHETHER I AM DRIVING

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¶14. (U) Representative Stearns of Florida asked whether the Saudi Arabian government (SAG) had plans to allow women to drive. He said he appreciated the attempts being made to help women succeed, including the construction of universities for women, but noted that if Saudi women were to compare their situation with that of Western women, they would find dramatic differences in terms of the amount of individual freedom granted. Bin Moammar responded by joking about his wife, who according to him, was a lousy driver who narrowly escaped two accidents and noted that he did not want her to drive again. He said that people resisted copying the culture of the West, which did not match Saudi beliefs and could not be "tuned" to Saudi culture. He explained there were social boundaries regarding women driving and that women themselves did not regard driving as a high priority. There was a dialogue on women's issues in Medina in which the women did not even raise driving as one of the issues as they had "more important issues," according to Bin Moammar. Moreover, he said, the Guardian of the Two Holy Mosques had emphasized that any change in Saudi Arabia would be looked to as a model by other countries in the region. (NOTE: women are allowed to drive in all other countries in the region. End note). Therefore, any proposed change would need to be thoroughly

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analyzed and examined for conformity with existing traditions, according to Bin Moammar

¶15. (U) Director of the Institute of Public Administration Dr. Al-Ahmadi concurred that Saudi society did not support women's driving. She said that although Bedouin women did drive, society as a whole "resisted Western recipes for change" and asked not to "be measured by whether she was driving." She personally wanted the right to drive but said: "please look beyond it." Dr. Ali Al-Khashban of the General Authority for Tourism and Antiquities said that KACND obtained results in getting society to accept change, noting that "Western culture was around us everywhere." Dr. Tamador Al-Ramah of King Saud University said that what was unique about KACND was that it respected women who did not want to mix with men or reveal their faces and "did not exclude them from being part of the country's future vision." He

elaborated on the conveniences that derived from having a chauffeur, including not having to find parking or maintaining the car. Chairwoman Lowey responded that most would be happy with chauffeurs, but questioned how women without the means to hire one would get around. Dr. Al-Khashban then conceded that allowing women to drive was "a step we want to take" and he was sure it would come soon.

#### MOE'S CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROJECT: DRAMATIC CHANGE AHEAD

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¶16. (U) The CODEL also listened to formal presentations from Dr. Naif Al-Roomi, Deputy Minister of Education, and Dr. Ali Alhakami, General Manager the Development Project at the Ministry of Education. Dr. Al-Roomi gave an overview of the MOE's curriculum development project involving the development of the primary and secondary education system and a math and science project. According to Dr. Al-Roomi, the new emphasis in education is on communication and dialogue. He explained that the primary and secondary education system project aimed at greatly reducing the number of subjects studied and that overall the MOE was moving away from subdividing subjects. For example for Arabic, students would study one rather than five books previously studied. For the development of the secondary education system project, students would study seven courses rather than 21 courses. Moreover, students would acquire life, labor market, and health skills in the newly revised curriculum, according to Dr. Al-Roomi. It is envisioned that the curriculum project will generate a "dramatic change" two years from now, Dr. Al-Roomi said. He also mentioned that a new English course content using the McGraw-Hill series had been selected and that math and science changes based on international standards were to be implemented this year. All-in-all, there would be a dramatic new curriculum for grades 1 through 12, he said.

¶17. (U) Dr. Bin Moammar said that Saudi Arabia's school system had five million students, 425,000 teachers, and 30,000 schools. Of these, 75 percent were government-built and the remainder rentals, according to Dr. Bin Moammar. He further noted that 54 percent of the teachers were females.

#### TATWEER PROGRAM MOVING KINGDOM TO NEW FRONTIERS

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¶18. (U) According to Dr. Al-Roomi, the Tatweer program is a "21st Century model of learning that defines goals for the educational system." Its aims are to produce critical thinkers and problem solvers, to promote flexibility, adaptability innovation and creativity, and to achieve recognition of the fact that the country was not living in isolation, Dr. Al-Roomi said. It is one of the components of the King's vision and will be moving Saudi Arabia to new frontiers, he noted. Saudi Arabia is aiming to become one of the world's top ten economies and students needed to be prepared to become members of the international community, Al-Roomi stated. Saudi Arabia is one of the countries with the highest population growth in the world and the educational budget is growing, according to Dr. Al-Roomi. In order to take the country to the future and to meet the demands for a skilled work force, a focus on quality and a system of educational standards was needed that would combine school services in a partnership with the wider community to "achieve excellence for all," he explained. The new educational system is to emphasize quality of learning,

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achievement, sustainable educational development, and openness to international best practices, he said.

#### NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR CHILDHOOD: STRATEGIC PLAN

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¶19. (U) Dr. Bandar Al Sowailem, Secretary General of the National Committee for UNICEF, said the National Committee for Childhood was moving into a new phase, with increased resources for the Commission, a new building, and a strategic plan to cover the needs of all children. According to him, the plan consisted of five parts focusing on education, health care, social problems, environmental safety, and culture and the media. It further included the creation of a civil society, he said. 5,000 children and 4,000 families were involved in developing the plan and in making policy recommendations, according to Dr. Al Sowailem.

¶20. (U) Dr. Al-Khalifa of King Saud University is participating in developing the plan's strategy. She said the plan's goal was to put children first and to create a strategy that maintained a balance between the global and the local. She said children should be looked at as children too, and not only as what they would become. She said children needed to be involved in shaping their culture and should be part of the strategy. Noting that children were involved with multi-media applications very early, Dr. Al-Khalifa said that the strategy also needed to examine the effects of the media in the widest sense, not only in terms of the educational and social effects.

¶21. (U) Congresswoman Lowey expressed her appreciation to the Saudi participants, noting that as a mother of three and grandmother of eight children, she was concerned about the future of our countries and felt a sense of urgency. She said that unless we spoke directly to the kids and made them understand that there was a path to a positive future, and that it was not okay to destroy families, communities, buildings and markets, the whole world was at risk.

¶22. (U) Dr. Bin Moammar ended the meeting by noting that Saudi Arabia was at the heart of Islamic countries and had made a huge investment in promoting reforms. He said the country's leadership was excellent and Saudi Arabia had a golden opportunity to get its right place in the world. King Abdullah's Interfaith Dialogue Initiative would turn "this area into the most peaceful place on earth," he concluded.

¶23. (U) The CODEL did not have the opportunity to clear this message before departing Saudi Arabia.  
SMITH